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ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s, adolescent novels treating racial strife have paralleled the civil rights movement. Before then, adolescent novels were oriented toward a white, middle-class audience, with settings in small towns and characters who were teenage Anglo-Saxons. Novels in the 1950s were, for the most part, unrealistic in their portrayals of racial problems, recommending accommodation by Negroes. During the 1960s, however, novels appeared which dealt more directly with racial problems. And in the 1970s, adolescent novels have treated the black ethnic experience itself. Hopefully, the problem of racial strife may be better understood through both the creation of adolescent novels free from generalizations and stereotypes and the reading of as wide a range of books as possible, especially by white adolescents. (JM)

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FROM STEPPIN STEBBINS TO SOUL BROTHERS: RACIAL STRIFE IN ADOLESCENT FICTION

The recent plethora of adolescent novels about racial strife is the culmination of an evolutionary pattern that has its parallel in the civil rights struggle that began in the early 1960's. Prior to this time adolescent novels were almost exclusively oriented toward a white middle class audience. In these books the setting is usually a small town with Anglo-Saxon teenagers as main characters. Fathers are non-interfering businessmen while mothers are tolerant housewives, and everyone lives peacefully on a "shady street where all the huge old houses are."[1] Even as late as 1965 there was an "almost complete omission of Negroes from books for children."[2] Those books which did exist tended to be typical adolescent romance novels except that the hero or heroine was black. No racial prejudice existed and the protagonist succeeded in a white world without any real problems. "The protagonist is usually female, and an attractive, understanding, safe boyfriend of the same color hovers in the background and makes unnecessary any worries about miscegenation."[3]

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[1]Gail Renee Rissi, "And She Let One Saddle Oxford Drop Lazily From Her Toe," Arizona English Bulletin, 14 (April 1972), 27.

[2]Nancy Larrick, "The All White World of Children's Books," Saturday Review, September 11, 1965, p. 63.

[3]Susan Peters, "The Black Experience in Books," Top of the News, 25 (June 1969), 386.

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Typical of the type of innocent racial romance novel available during the 1950's are Hope Newell's A Cap For Mary Ellis and a sequel, Mary Ellis, Student Nurse. In these two books, which are basically career novels, the heroine is presented with integration situations that are never fully examined. "The treatment of the racial issue may represent reality but it will seem like avoidance to older readers of the '70's."[4]

In A Cap For Mary Ellis, a teenage girl begins her first year at an all white nursing school in upstate New York. Mary Ellis Stebbins lives in Harlem, but the description of her mother's apartment is hardly typical.

> The Stebbins lived in one of six Harlem apartment houses grouped around a tree-shaded garden. Steppin had moved them there soon after he got his first job as a professional dancer. That was 'way back when Mary Ellis was in grade school, but she had never gotten over the wonder of these sun-drenched rooms with the cleverly built-in cupboards, bookcases, and dining nook. Above all, she loved the modern bathroom, immaculate in pale-blue tile porcelain and gleaming nickel fixtures.[5]

Mary Ellis is persuaded to train at Woodycrest because she will "be opening a door to others of her race." Once there she makes friends among the other students and enjoys her work. She is nicknamed "Tater" because she is like a "little brown potato," and the only girl who seems to snub her is Ada Belle Briggs, a slothful, grumpy girl from "the South."

For all practical purposes, Mary Ellis' color is of no consequence to the plot. The "problems" she faces are how to give a bed bath and take a patient's temperature and pulse. Later, Mary Ellis becomes homesick and decides to leave; however, when a food poisoning epidemic breaks out she "comes-to-realize" she is needed and goes on to become "capped" as a nursing student by novel's end.

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[4]Nicholas J. Karolides, "Focus on Black Adolescents," Arizona English Bulletin, 14 (April 1972), 80.

[5]Hope Newell, A Cap For Mary Ellis (New York: Berkley Books, 1963), p. 14.

The only hint of racial problems [illegible] an allusion to a restaurant that "serves colored people without any fuss or bother" and the seldom-seen Ada Belle Briggs, who is disliked by everyone at the school and eventually flunks out and leaves in a huff. Actually, the kind of racism which appears in the novel is the unconscious racism on the part of the author when she names her characters "Tater" and "Steppin Stebbins" without a hint of the pejorative nature of these terms.

Occasically a rare book did appear before 1960 that directly confronted the problem of racial integration. Certainly one of the first adolescent novels to treat this theme was Call Me Charley, by Jesse Jackson published in 1945. This simply written novel tells the story of a Negro boy whose family moves to an all white suburb from the "Bottoms," where the "railroad tracks run right across the streets." The protagonist encounters racial slurs from other boys, is ignored by the English teacher in the casting of the junior high play, and refused admittance to the community swimming pool. But in the end everyone does a guilty turnabout as the most bigoted boy is converted and Charley is accepted.[6] Charley's mother provides the theme of the novel when she states: "'As long as you work hard and try to do right . . . you will always find some good people like Doc Cunningham or Tom and his folks marching along with you in the right path. And fellows like George may come along too, sooner or later.'"[7] The happy ending is unrealistic and forced and the protaganist is somewhat unbelievable in his easy acceptance of the situation; still, the book is a milestone in that it is one of the first novels to confront the problem of racial strife.

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[6]Later books by Jesse Jackson follow the same character through his high school graduation to an Olympic tryout. These sequels are essentially sports books for boys and the protagonist's color has little to do with any of the stories.

[7]Jesse Jackson, Call Me Charley (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1945), p. 156.

One of the more realistic adolescent novels about racial problems to appear in the 1950's is Hard to Tackle by Gilbert Douglas. Basically a boy's sports book, the story is about a Negro football player who encounters difficulties when his parents move into an all-white neighborhood. The story is told from the point of view of Clint Thomas, a white student, who encourages Jeff Washington to try out for the football team. He organizes team members to help repair the Washington house after the windows are broken, and finally when the house is partially burned the neighborhood feels sorry for the black family and offers them some measure of acceptance. At different times in the novel, Jeff Washington talks to Clint about the prejudice he encounters and this serves to present the plight of Negroes struggling to advance in a racist society. At a rally held by the anti-housing group, the white minister gives an impassioned speech about brotherhood and the team coach expresses the novel's theme during a locker room talk after he has kicked four boys off the team because of their attitude.

> 'I'm glad you're not quitting, Jeff. But whether you quit or not, the others aren't coming back. Not while I'm coach. The majority of fellows are on your side, Jeff. You're one of the few Negro students in our school. You're so much in the minority that it looks as if only white boys are capable of cruelty and prejudice. But deep down, people are pretty much the same everywhere. There are people of your race who have the same faults as some of us. So don't go judging all of us by what a few may do. That's not fair, either.'[8]

What makes this novel more realistic than some other books published at this time is that there are no quick character conversions to bring about a satisfying ending. The Vanderpool family, who lead the opposition, become resigned to the situation but are unchanged in their attitude to Negroes, and the house-burning works to make the community realize what racism can lead to even though

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[8]Gilbert Douglas, Hard to Tackle (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), p. 138. (The novel was first published in hardcover in 1956.)

as individuals the people remain the same. In short, no easy solutions are offered in the book.

But for the most part adolescent novels about racial strife published during the 1950's opted for accommodation. In Hold Fast to Your Dreams a Negro girl works to become a ballet dancer and her talent alone overcomes white racism;[9] in South Town the white racist reforms and a white doctor states that "progress is being made all the time. . . . In spite of what happened last week, things are better now than they were; and in some places, I understand, you might be very comfortable, and the children could grow up to forget this."[10] Thus, the message for Negroes in these novels tends to be "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" and whites will grant acceptance; for whites the moral is to treat people as individuals and learn that "they're just as good as we are."

But then in the 1960's--and probably tied as much to the civil rights movement as to changes taking place in adolescent fiction--a number of novels appeared that dealt more directly with racial problems. After 1966 as high as "19.5 per cent of the recommended fiction and nonfiction books contained some concern for racial strife,"[11] but still many of these novels were unrealistic and simplistic in their solutions. One of the most popular 1960 adolescent-problem novels that treats an integration theme is A Question of Harmony. Still, this book is essentially an adolescent romance with a superimposed racial incident. Fully one half of the novel deals with a white high school girl's "problems" of dating a doctor's son. The story is set in "Valley City," a midwestern city with

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[9]In a biographical note the author, Catherine Blanton, states that "if we could know all the people of the world as our next door neighbors, our problems could be quickly solved in friendly agreement."

[10]Lorenz Graham, South Town (New York: New American Library, 1958), p. 132.

[11]Janet K. McReynolds, "A Study of Common Aspects Found in Selected Literature for Adolescents, 1966 to 1970" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Illinois University, 1971), p. 89.

all the trappings of small town life. Jeanne Blake, the girl of the story, meets Dave Carpenter at a picnic, but she is forced to call her father when two of the boys begin drinking.

> 'Two of the boys were awful,' she said. 'It was bad enough when they started to spike their Cokes, but then they tried to make me drink some of it too.'
>
> 'Irresponsible young louts!' her father grumbled.
>
> Tears stung Jeanne's eyes. 'I don't suppose I'll ever hear from him again after this mess.'
>
> 'I should't think you'd mind,' her father said.
>
> But I do mind, she thought unhappily. I liked him.[12]

After that the couple go for butternut sundaes, play badminton together, share the thrill of going to new classes during the fall of their senior year, and participate in classical musical concerts. Jeanne Blake plays the cello while her budding boy friend plays the piano, and much of the story revolves around the description of orchestra rehearsals and the challenge of moving up to "first chair." Major decisions are what pieces to play for scholarship auditions, and the big dance and the big concert are equally climatic scenes at the end of the novel.

The racial issue is introduced when Jeanne, her boyfriend, and Mel Johnson begin a classical trio. Mel is a Negro who plays the violin and is also the star football player on his high school team. They are asked by the Garden Club to play at a dinner at the local hotel, and after they finish they go to the hotel dining room for chocolate eclairs. There they are refused service, and at first the group does not understand why.

> 'I must ask you to leave.' the hostess repeated.
>
> 'But why?' Jeanne demanded.
>
> Two or three boys left their booths and strolled, with ill-concealed curiosity, past the end of the aisle.

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[12]Gretchen Sprague, A Question of Harmony (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 18.

> Dave turned his head and looked at Jeanne. 'Don't you know?'
>
> 'It's me, Jeannie,' Mel said gently.
>
> Jeanne stared at him in astonished silence. Presently she became aware that her mouth was open. She closed it. Mel. He's a Negro. I'd forgotten.[13]

This leads to a spontaneous sit-in by the three teenagers and the manager is called. He wants to avoid a public scene, but still he is adamant that the group not be served. A newspaper reporter takes pictures and Jeanne's parents are called. At this point Jeanne learns about racial segregation. The Blake family "haven't met any Negroes" and Jeanne "never even thought of Valley City's having a Negro section"; now, Jeanne believes she is snubbed at school simply for having taken part in the sit-in.

The hotel manager is secretary of the Civic Club and he is in charge of selecting judges for the music auditions which determine the town's college scholarships. At the restaurant the manager had hinted that Mel's father would lose his janitor's job, and now the group is sure he will see that Mel fails to win an award. But a number of the townspeople side with the teenagers and stop going to the hotel for "Sunday brunch." The paper has a supporting editorial, and eventually the owner writes a letter of apology to the three musicians.

On the day of the scholarship auditions Mel not only wins a scholarship but the hotel management adds a special five hundred dollar award to go with it. (The hotel manager himself presents the scholarship gift.) At first Mel wonders if he should accept the award, reasoning that "he gave it to me because I'm a colored boy and all of a sudden it's good business to be nice to colored boys." But Dr. Carpenter persuades Mel the offer might have been given in good faith because "he wants to encourage string music."

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[13]Sprague, p. 91.

The theme of the novel is that people should listen more to each other and not jump to conclusions, all of which neatly sidesteps the racial issue. The fact is that Mel was not served because of his color and the hotel gave him the award because it was indeed "good business." However, the novel's real moral is that racial problems can be solved easily with a little trust and understanding, hardly in keeping with the events in the story. Earlier Jeanne believed she was being snubbed by people for her participation in the sit-in, but she learns that her girl friend had really been upset over a boy, that the couple who canceled her as a babysitter really had a sick youngster, and that her former boyfriend was not upset over her behavior. "Nobody took you at your word," Dr. Carpenter tells Mel at the end of the novel, "and there's where all the trouble started." This advice is offered as the all-too-neat solution for racial strife and dating problems as well.

In the final chapter the novel shifts gears and presents a different didactic message about a "fast crowd" leading to trouble. As the group is sitting around the Carpenter kitchen there is a crash outside and everyone rushes out to discover that the "irresponsible young louts" from the picnic have had a car accident. Dr. Carpenter saves a girl's life with a new medical technique he had just read about, and then everyone returns to the house. The racial problem is forgotten about with this final piece of unbelievable melodrama, and a few pages later the story returns to its romantic plot as Jeanne receives her first kiss from Dave. ("Warm and gentle, his lips touched hers. Roman candles; skyrockets. Drums beating, and the far, soft music of flutes.") Thus, the novel hardly does more than mention racial segregation and gives oversimplified impressions about how easily the problem can be solved.

One of the few adolescent novels to treat interracial dating also appeared

in the early 1960's.[14] Anything for a Friend is about a white teenager who is tricked into asking a Negro girl to the senior prom. The situation is dealt with humorously and the white protagonist's predicaments are reminiscent of Max Shulman's books. The novel is not so much concerned about integration as it is with such perpetual teenage problems as the generation gap and the search for identity. But the novel does try for a tragic ending when the protaganist finds he lacks the courage to continue his relationship with the girl. In a sense both these books could be called racial novels for a 1960's white adolescent audience--a black/white problem is presented from a white point of view with a solution arrived at by adolescents acting as the conscience for the community.

Because of the popularity of A Question of Harmony in the Xerox Education Secondary Book Club other novels were offered in paperback that dealt with racial strife. A few of these novels were told from the point of view of Negroes and provide "a valid portrayal of the values and life-styles of American ethnic minorities."[15] For the most part novels with a Negro as narrator did not sell well, but this is perhaps due to the nature of the book club's adolescent audience. Their market is predominately small town, suburban and rural districts, and Catholic schools that lack black/minority representation.[16]

Beginning in the 1970's adolescent novels appeared that treated the black ethnic experience itself and in which "young characters . . . define their own world and establish their own values, often at variance with society's demands."[17]

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[14]M.E. Kerr is currently completing an adolescent novel on this subject which should be available in the spring.

[15]G. Robert Carlsen, Books and the Teen-age Reader (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 209.

[16]Information in a personal letter from Earl A. French, former editor of Xerox Education Publications Secondary Book Clubs, 9 March 1974.

[17]Caren Dybek, "Black Literature for Adolescents," English Journal, 63 (January 1974), 64.

One of the more popular of these books that use a black protagonist is The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou.[18] In this book fourteen-year-old Louretta Hawkins lives with her mother and seven brothers and sisters in a northern ghetto. She shares her bed with two sisters and the family subsists on an older brother's Post Office job. Louretta's father has left home and her mother is proud of the fact that they have never had to go on welfare. In any number of ways the girl's ethnic experience is recounted, even to the food the family eats.

> Louretta didn't mind having beans and greens for supper because Momma flavored them with cured neck bones that gave them a delicious meaty taste. She thought they were lucky to have meat once a week; most of the Southside kids, especially the ones on Welfare, never had meat at all, except the nasty, cardboard-tasting canned meat they gave away at the Surplus Food Center.[19]

Louretta has an older sister with an illegitimate child who is cared for by Louretta's mother, but her situation is really not a social stigma in Southside culture. Hair straightening is mentioned as well as the meaning of the various shades of darkness among Negroes. Louretta has light skin and slightly red hair, and some of the neighborhood boys imply that her real father was white. (It is later explained there is "white blood" in her father's family dating from slave times.) The handclapping and "Amen" evangelism of the black Baptist Church is introduced into the novel when the Reverend Mamie delivers a eulogy for one of Louretta's friends. Unlike the Mary Ellis nurse stories and A Question of Harmony, this novel is realistic in terms of its depiction of a typical black family recently relocated in a northern city. The author, Kristin Hunter, has said she "tried to show some of the positive values existing in the so-called ghetto" in

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[18] Although this was a poor seller for Xerox in 1970, the New York Times Survey listed it as one of the top fifty books in popularity among teenagers.

[19] Kristin Hunter, The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 27.

an attempt to "confirm young black people in their frail but growing belief in their own self-worth."[20]

Louretta's brother opens a printing shop and Lou persuades him to let her friends use a portion of the building as a clubhouse. Lou and her "gang" meet at the shop where they compose and sing soul music. They are helped by a famous blues singer and by some of the teachers from their school; however, a number of the boys are still more interested in fighting the Avengers, a rival street gang. One of the boys is particularly rebellious and his hatred is directed toward all whites. His desire is to print a radical paper denouncing the white racist establishment.

The novels' villain is Officer Lafferty, a brutal white policeman who constantly harrasses Lou and her friends.

> In school they taught that the policeman was your friend. Louretta and all the other Southside pupils smiled wisely whenever a teacher said this, because they knew better. They knew that all policemen were not their friends, even if they might be the friends of children on the other side of town, and that some policemen, like Officer Lafferty, were their worst enemies. Officer Lafferty's favorite sport was to catch groups of Southside boys in out-of-the-way places like vacant buildings and alleys, where there would be no witnesses to what he did. He would call them names and accuse them of committing crimes, just to provoke them into saying something back or hitting him or running away. If they ran away he would shoot them. If they did anything else, he would beat them up with his club and take them to the police station and charge them with resisting arrest and assulting an officer.[21]

When Lou and her group hold a dance at the print shop, Lafferty and a group of policemen break in and search the members. In the ensuing scuffle one of the group is shot by a policeman and both Lou and her brother William become more

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[20]"The Soul Brothers: Background of a Juvenile," Publisher's Weekly, 193 (May 27, 1968), p. 31.

[21]Hunter, p. 11.

militant in their attitudes.

> 'Lou,' William said seriously, 'I learned something tonight. Those cops can't tell the difference between a respectable Negro and an outlaw. They treated me just as rough as everybody else. So that makes us all outlaws, at least in their eyes.'[22]

For a brief time Lou decides to join a black African group which denounces all whites, but she realizes this approach is filled with too much hate and is merely another form of racism.

Up to this point the novel is honest and uncompromising in its depiction of a particular segment of Negro existence; however, the ending is unrealistic and unsatisfactory. At the funeral of the boy killed at the dance the members of the Cheerful Baptist Church sing a "lament for Jethro," a part of which is aired on an evening television news show. The next day representatives of a musical recording company call at the club house and offer the group a contract with a "nice little sum in advance for each of you, and more if the record is a success." The recording representatives ask the kids to "please run through the number you did at the church. The one about the boy who died." Eagerly the group sings and plays "Lament for Jethro," and the Soul Brothers and Sister Lou are born.

In a concluding chapter readers learn that the record is a hit and that Lou is banking her money, except for enough to buy her mother a washer and dryer. The most incorrigible member of the gang begins "saving every cent for college" as he unbelievably turns from "an ardent revolutionary . . . to an enthusiastic booster of business, free enterprise and captialism."[23] And to complete the fairy tale ending it is revealed that Officer Lafferty has been suspended.

In a sense it could be argued that The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou is no

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[22] Hunter, p. 110.

[23] Ibid., p. 187.

different from other "safe" adolescent romance novels. Lou is basically a "nice" girl who studies har, gets good grades, and dreams of going to college. "in fact, she's so WASH-ish inside, one gets the impression that she wouldn't eat a slice of watermelon if you paid her."[24] Further, the all-too-convenient ending is used to solve the novel's racial problems and provide a happy and successful future for the story's characters. Still, this novel honestly depicts lower class ghetto life and shows the conditions which can produce racial hatred. In this sense the novel is much more mature and realistic in its approach to racial strife than most of its predecessors.

Increasingly, adolescent novels about the ethnic experience incorporate the use of black dialect. His Own Where uses a stream-of-consciousness technique to tell the story of a young black girl trying to escape the sordidness of her life. She and her boyfriend go to a cemetery where "things stay in they place." "What you have against people if they sit tight and have like the telephone to do the traveling," she asks. "Well, look, I don't mind the telephone except it be like television and whole world is a box-up make-believe to make you think you into what be really happening but all the time you into nothing really but that box."[25] The novel offers little hope for happiness beyond a brief retreat from the city to a place where only the dead exist.

Recently a number of books have been promoted and sold through teenage book clubs which were not written specifically as adolescent novels. For the most part these are more realistic in their treatment of the black ethnic experience than are traditional adolescent novels. One of the most successful of these new books is Daddy Was a Number Runner, by Louise Meriwether. Here

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[24] Nancy Mack, "Youth Books: They Aren't What They Used to Be or Are They?" Hartford Currant (July 8, 1973), p. 6.

[25] June Jordan, His Own Where (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), p. 80.

life in Harlem is depicted as tough, degrading, and unfair. There is no escape from the world of perversion in which twelve-year-old Francie Coffin finds herself. Good grades in school, obedience to parents and the law, avoidance of cursing all fail to help Francie in a culture filled with rapists, gang fighters, homosexuals, and rioters. She encounters men who give her nickels to feel her legs and who pay her a quarter to drop her panties. She is involved in an attempted rape, witnesses another rape, and is acquainted with a street whore. In a foreword James Baldwin calls the novel "the American dream in black-face, Horatio Alger revealed, the American success story with a price tag showing."[26] In the end Francie is on the street in front of her tenement and we hear her spell out the truth of the story. "We was all poor and black and apt to stay that way, and that was that." Even the final word of the novel, "shit," denotes Francie's despair and anguish that will be present for the rest of her life.

Among the most recent novels to deal with racial strife that is being sold by the Xerox and Scholastic Book Clubs is A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich, by Alice Childress. This account of a thirteen-year-old boy hooked on drugs is told from different viewpoints by people who affect the protagonist's life in some way. (One chapter is written from the point of view of a drug pusher.) Although the book is well written, there is very little "story" to it and much of the novel is an indictment of schools, teachers, and social workers for their lack of concern and knowledge of the drug problem. At the end of the novel the protagonist is saved by a black

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[26]Daddy Was a Number Runner (New York: Pyramid Books, 1971), p. 7.

father figure who is "supportin three adults, one chile, and the United States government."[27] The implication is that rather than white do-gooders or black militancy love and sincere concern are needed to rescue boys like Benjie Johnson.

It will be interesting to see the direction of future adolescent novels that treat racial strife. So far these books have paralleled the cival rights struggle from the 1950's to the present, and it is difficult to guess what subjects are left to be explored. (It is possible that events like the current Boston school controversy might be the subject of fiction.) What is hoped is that the better novels now available will be used in school classrooms and made a part of library collections. Because many of the books use generalizations and stereotypes, it is necessary for adolescents--especially white adolescents--to read as wide a range of books as possible. Although this approach may not bring about any lasting solutions it is at least possible that the nature of the problem of racial strife may be understood.

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[27]Alice Childress, A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich (New York: Avon Books, 1973), p. 126.